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‘Let’s see who’s being creative out there’: Lessons from the ‘Creative Citizens’ programme in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Policy critiques indicate that strategies aimed at fostering participation in publicly funded arts have focused too heavily on individuals’ capacity for engagement, rather than on the capacity of the sector to engage individuals. Programmes like ‘Creative People and Places’ (CPP) see this capacity as shared, community networks, ideas, infrastructure and skills. Through analysis of one local council’s Arts Development Service, specifically Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) in Northern Ireland (NI), this article brings the role and position of local government work to light within this broader understanding of capacity as a community-wide phenomenon. Through focusing on the assumptions, operations and experiences regarding cultural participation held by MEABC’s arts staff, the article enhances the learning about community capacity more formally underway in the CPP projects and supports the notion that capacity building is a multi-directional process. In taking a new approach to programme delivery, the team’s assumptions and beliefs about cultural participation and infrastructure have been challenged. This change in perception has impacted the development of their practice to promote and develop arts and cultural participation in their locality. The study has implications for what more democratic practices of participation might mean to the strategic decision-making processes of local cultural policy

development and governance. As a result, the article advocates for more and deeper consideration of local government as a key actor in the arts and cultural sector and cultural policy-making.

Keywords

local government

cultural participation

Northern Ireland

cultural governance

cultural policy

arts centres

Introduction

Perceived levels of participation in publicly funded arts have been cause for concern in the UK arts and cultural sector. Efforts to broaden access and tackle psychological, economic, social and spatial barriers to engagement remain key policy goals for Creative Scotland as well as the Arts Councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) (CyMAL: Museums, Libraries and Archives 2010; Arts Council England [ACE] 2013; Arts Council Northern Ireland [ACNI] 2013; Creative Scotland 2014; Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure [DCAL] 2015). Yet policy critiques indicate that strategies have focused too heavily on individuals' capacity for engagement in publicly funded arts, rather than on the capacity of the sector to engage individuals (e.g. see Jancovich and Bianchini

2013). Initiatives like Arts Council England's 'Creative People and Places' (CPP) take a more encompassing approach to the issue of capacity. The 21 funded projects strive to foster more democratic and participatory engagement in the publicly funded arts. They support the development of locally led and responsive arts activities by employing an action-research approach, cross-sector partnerships and relationships involving co-commissioning and co-production between communities, artists and producers. While the focus remains on 'the skills, ability and willingness to create, develop, promote or engage with arts activity', the work within the projects aim to develop 'people, systems and resources' (Robinson 2016: 14). In this sense, capacity building is about the skills and interrelations existing and emerging amongst a network of community groups and organizations as well as arts and cultural producers, service providers, funders, makers, attenders and venues.

This article explores these ideas through analysis of one local council's Arts Development Service, specifically Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) in NI. The article contributes consideration of the practitioner's perception and experience of the notion of 'cultural participation' in the context of this council's arts service. While not engaged in CPP, the team's establishment of a new, public facing, festival-like cultural programme entitled, 'Creative Citizens' in Ballymena, Co. Antrim, led to unexpected capacity building that is relevant to CPP learning. In taking a new approach to programme delivery, the team's assumptions and beliefs about cultural participation and infrastructure have been challenged. As a result, the staff have become more enthusiastic and

feel better equipped to engage more openly and directly with the artistic, creative and cultural interests of local residents. This change in perception has impacted the way they are further developing their practice to promote and develop arts and cultural participation in their locality.

Through focusing on the assumptions, operations and experiences of a particular team of staff in a local council arts service in NI, the article enhances the learning about community capacity more formally underway in the CPP projects. In particular, it brings the role and position of local government work in community capacity to light. The article considers the conditions and influences that determine how artistic, creative and cultural participation is addressed in local government arts and cultural policy and service provision. With very little research available on the role of local government in the arts in the United Kingdom, much less on capacity building (Gray 2002; Lee and Gilmore 2012), the study has implications for what more democratic practices of participation might mean to the strategic decision-making processes of local cultural policy development and governance. As a result, the article advocates for more and deeper consideration of local government as a key actor in the arts and cultural sector and cultural policy-making.

Cultural participation and capacity building

In policy and programming in the United Kingdom, non-engagement in arts and cultural participation are typically viewed as being a 'problem' with the individual. That is, the individual who is not accessing publicly funded arts and cultural activity is a 'non-participant', an individual disengaged (Stevenson 2013). This

assumption has prompted and supported audience development initiatives aimed at addressing the individual's deficit, often through educational activities or subsidized ticket prices (Jancovich 2015). While some progress has been made within individual projects, research shows that policies and audience development initiatives for promoting participation in state-subsidized arts in the United Kingdom have largely failed to diversify their audiences (Bennett et al. 2009; Northern Ireland Assembly [NIA], Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee 2016; Warwick Commission 2015). As a result, instead of seeing 'people's lack of engagement in art' as the matter to be addressed, researchers have called for deeper consideration of the artistic and cultural offer and the capacity of the sector to engage; not just the mechanisms for engagement (Jancovich 2011: 272–73; Jancovich and Bianchini 2013; Gilmore 2014). In exploring these critiques, this section will focus on two areas in particular: the parameters defining, and operational practices for, participation.

First, approaches to defining artistic, creative and cultural activity, resources and infrastructure are of import here. As Jancovich (2011: 272–73) explains, 'the deficit model approach to understanding arts and culture presumes [agreement] of how to define both quality and art'. Policies and practices in the arts and cultural sector are often dominated by a 'cultural elite' existing in small, exclusive and self-legitimizing networks of influence (Griffiths et al. 2008: 198; Evans 2001). As a result, localized or community-based interpretations of creative, artistic and cultural participation have oft been neglected in cultural policy

development and offering (Evans 2001; Gilmore 2013). The relationship of 'everyday' or 'mundane' and non-institutional forms of cultural participation – like going to the pub, chatting with friends, shopping or a walk in the park and assets, like networks and venues (e.g. community groups and centres) – to the professional sector as a whole has not been fully recognized (Ebrey 2016: 160; Miles and Sullivan 2012). This neglect has, in turn, had bearing on the sector's capacity to understand the 'act of engagement' in artistic, creative and cultural activity itself (Jancovich 2011: 273).

Second, is the significance of arts and cultural management practice. The parameters in which artistic, creative and cultural activity are defined have restricted the development of more democratic approaches for nurturing and engaging in the cultural life of local communities (Gilmore 2014; Miles and Sullivan 2012). Many arts and cultural professionals assume that the 'public lacks the skills and knowledge to make good decisions about the arts' (Keaney 2006: 14). When, in fact, research shows that the public feels that state funded arts and culture have been at a remove from their own interests and experiences (Jancovich 2011; Warwick Commission 2015). The sector has been placing strong emphasis on examining the 'sociological determinants of cultural activity' (Evans 2016: 3). As a result, efforts to engage the public have often involved top-down audience development policy and funding initiatives that place the onus on the individual to improve their engagement, rather than the arts and cultural organization and policy-maker to consider the contribution their own

perspectives or positions make to this lack of engagement (Jancovich and Bianchini 2013). These management and programmatic practices have thus far failed to broaden the range and reach of audiences for publicly funded arts and cultural activity (Northern Ireland Assembly [NIA], Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee 2016; Warwick Commission 2015). Management practices need to better recognize and respond to the daily aspects and structure of an individual's life, including work and family, as well as locality, as heavy influences on one's artistic, creative and cultural engagement (Miles and Sullivan 2012).

Initiatives like Arts Council England's CPP attempt to address these issues to some extent. Efforts have emphasized acknowledging, respecting and accessing individuals' interests in more vernacular culture and creative activities as a 'gateway' to engagement in the fine and performing arts and heritage (Keaney 2006: 37). They also stress public involvement in programmatic decision-making and co-creation of work. Yet, as acknowledged in the recent CPP evaluation report, for these initiatives to make an impact on engagement in publicly funded arts and culture and/or the sector's engagement with the public, they must be sustained over a long period of time by institutions and professionals open to the kind of transformation they aim to foster (Robinson 2016).

In order to understand any potential for policy and institutional or practical change, the role and experiences of 'individual actors must be considered in relation to structural approaches and concepts' (Olsson and Hysing 2012: 258;

Jarret et al. 2005). Research in public administration and political science shows that a practitioner's trust in the public's capacity to make informed and (what are perceived to be) appropriate decisions greatly impacts the design of participatory processes as well as the make-up of who participates (Michels and de Graaf 2010; Yang 2009). Yet, much of the literature exploring the impact of participation in public services and policy-making, including in the arts, has tended to focus on techniques and methods of participation or the capacity of the citizen, overlooking the role and experience of the cultural professional (Jancovich 2015). What research has taken place has shown that the development of participation in public decision-making about and within the arts has been slow (Fennell and Gavelin 2009; see also Courage 2017). Work by Jancovich reveals that professionals, including Arts Council and local government arts staff, have tended to regard participatory decision-making as avenues for legitimizing arts policy decisions and for raising awareness about the arts. She found shared perceptions stressing the importance of 'educating participants' rather than building the capacity of 'the deliverers' (Jancovich 2011: 275, 2015).

Exploring capacity building in institutions like local government requires examination of 'people' in addition to 'systems' (Bryan and Brown 2015: 427). In developing this consideration in relation to MEABC and Creative Citizens, this article focuses solely on the perceptions and experiences of the MEABC team in relation to their role and responsibilities to arts and cultural work in their local council. In doing so, this article does not seek to overemphasize the role of local

government arts service staff more generally, but to acknowledge their 'discretion and influence [...] in agenda setting, [...] implementation', evaluation and policy-making (Newsinger and Green 2016; Johanson et al. 2014; Olsson and Hysing 2012: 258; Lipsky 1980). This authority is apparent in the important brokering roles they play between government and community and the professional and non-professional arts sectors. It is also evident in the decisions and actions they take in daily operations, which impact not only the experience of public services for arts and culture, but also the development of policy.

In the section that follows, the article further considers the impact broader approaches to defining and engaging cultural participation might have on local cultural governance. The role and capacity of local government in the arts will be explored through more specific examination of the conceptualization and structural approaches of cultural participation in Northern Irish cultural policy. This discussion provides the context for exploring the capacity building experienced by the MEABC Arts Service staff.

Questions of capacity in local government in NI

Four key factors position local government as a significant, though not necessarily recognized, actor in shaping state-based terms and conditions for cultural participation in NI specifically: (1) an absence of strategic cultural policy direction at Executive level; (2) a statutory role in arts and cultural provision for local councils with designated arts services staff; (3) a growing emphasis by Arts

Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) on the role of physical infrastructure in promoting arts and cultural participation; and (4) a new emphasis on partnership working and citizen participation in local governance. While so much more could be discussed here regarding the development of cultural policy in NI (see Walker 2008; Lappin 2012; Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley 2017), these issues are briefly taken in turn below. The focus is on these four areas as significant determinants of how artistic, creative and cultural participation is addressed in local government arts service provision in NI. This discussion sets the scene for exploring capacity building issues that were raised for the MEABC team.

Before beginning, it must first be acknowledged that the development of executive or local level cultural policy in post-conflict NI is complicated by the nature in which cultural identity and expression is highly politicized there as compared to the rest of the United Kingdom (Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley 2017). For the sake of focus, explorations of this issue will not be exhaustive. As Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley (2017) recognize, it is nearly impossible to discuss arts and cultural issues in NI without some simplification of quite complex issues of the relationship of culture to conflict. And so this discussion commences with this caveat.

To begin, NI has never seen a formalized cultural policy for the region. Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley (2017: 4–5) argue that creating one would mean recognizing a sense of cultural identity that would risk ‘alienating’ large

percentages of the population. A dedicated ministerial Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) did not exist at Executive level until after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. As in the rest of the United Kingdom, much of its work is carried out by arm's length bodies, such as Northern Ireland Screen, ACNI, NI Libraries and National Museums Northern Ireland. However, the recent consolidation of twelve ministerial departments into nine, which took effect in 2016, has seen DCAL subsumed into a Department for Communities along with aspects of the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development (DSD) – a move that has been perceived as a lack of respect for, and commitment to, the arts and cultural sector. This change has coincided with a scramble to establish a cross-cutting executive arts and cultural strategy, which went out to consultation in early 2016 and has yet to be further formalized at the time of writing. The absence of such a policy de-legitimizes the importance of artistic, creative and cultural activity to the cultural rights of Northern Irish citizens and raises questions regarding the State's capacity to support these rights.

Definitions of cultural participation at Executive level are imprecise and vague and reinforce the 'deficit model' viewpoint discussed above. For example DCAL's consultation document for a *Strategy for Culture and Arts, 2016–2026* states, 'arts and culture mean many things to many people. There is no single definition [...] (DCAL 2015: 13). Yet, despite acknowledging a wide variety of interpretations and thus a lack of clarity for policy, DCAL research still concludes, 'a significant number of citizens are not engaging with arts and culture' (DCAL 2015: 13). While due in part to the complex issues of culture in NI referred to

above, this ambiguity is also reflective of the methods typically employed by government to measure cultural participation. Valuations are often based on a return on financial investment where artistic, creative and cultural participation and production are assessed based on economic and social stability (O'Brien 2013). In fact, economic uses of artistic, creative and cultural activity is a point of agreement among political parties in NI (Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley 2017). This alignment is evident in DCAL business plans, where the focus of its work had been on tackling poverty and social exclusion, fostering a 'united community' and promoting economic development (DCAL 2015: 7). As demonstrated in a recent enquiry into *Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities* conducted by the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly (2016), resulting strategies have lacked acknowledgement of the diversity of creative, cultural and artistic practices currently taking place and experienced in people's everyday lives.

Local government is well placed to engage in a more localized and everyday notion of cultural participation. With the scope of its work carried out in relation to 'neighbourhoods and places [and] communities and residents', it is arguably the most rooted in a sense of place and the daily lives of local of citizens (Lavarack and Ryan 2015: 52). While local council powers in NI have been limited for quite some time, they have had statutory powers for cultural provision since the early 1970s. More recently they typically distribute funding and commission and produce work across a range of art forms and are involved in local as well as

national and international arts and cultural networks. This more formalized arrangement places local councils in a significant position to actively facilitate, support, champion or hinder artistic, creative and cultural activity thus 'engendering a spirit, if not the word of, national cultural policy' (Wisdom and Marks 2016: 196).

However, the capacity for local government (staff and the institution) to engage in more citizen-oriented and, arguably, less elite interpretations regarding cultural participation is not necessarily straightforward. There has been no clear, directed strategy across local councils for arts and culture. When the statutory role came into place, financial contributions from local councils were small and committees 'of district council employees, local volunteers and elected representatives [... took] responsibility for organizing cultural events' and managing arts and cultural delivery services (Walker 2008: 186; Arts Managers' Group Northern Ireland [NI] 2014). These committees are arguably a more citizen-directed technique for supporting arts and cultural provision and services at local level. However, the professionalization of local government services and provision for arts and culture that emerged with the establishment of arts and cultural officer posts in the 1980s impacted the role of these committees (Local Government Act 1972; Walker 2008; Arts Managers' Group [NI] 2015). As interviews with current staff indicate, arts and cultural service staff have had varying relationships with these committees, with them maintaining a programming role to serving as advisors or as a consultation group and in some cases, halting altogether.

The roles, responsibilities and influence of local councils in arts and cultural provision and services have been particularly impacted by the growing emphasis on the provision of physical infrastructure in NI. Sarah Lappin (2012) and Una Walker (2008) give strong overviews of this history. The Department of Education's initiation of the *Capital Programme for the Arts* in 1977/78 allowed local councils to 'access funding for opening arts centres, [which] provided venues for touring programmes initiated by [local council voluntary] arts committees', the Arts Council and local council arts service staff' (Walker 2008: 46; ACNI 1978: 11). The Recreation and Youth Service (NI) Orders of 1973 and 1986 further instructed local councils to secure the provision for facilities adequate 'for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities'. Still, a large amount of arts activity had been occurring in informal spaces (Walker 2008; Lappin 2012). However, in 1994, ACNI (1995) introduced a new spatial strategy that indicated a greater role for local government in the arts. The plan sought to tackle physical, psychological and educational barriers to engagement in the publicly funded arts by making £70 million of Lottery funding available for new capital projects aimed at positioning an arts centre within twenty miles of each resident of NI. The development, which was also hoped to have economic benefits to local areas, required local government involvement in identifying need and 'usually' co-sponsorship of venues (Lappin 2012: 45).

Most of the 39 resulting venues, ranging from those occupying refitted historic buildings to new builds, receive some type of local government subsidy or grant and many, though not all, are local government operated (Deloitte 2011).

Research interviews conducted thus far with different local government arts service staff across NI ($n=9$) indicate that the policy has positioned many local council arts service staff in new roles as venue programmers and building managers. A number of individuals who now manage venues had previously been in what many termed arts development roles. In interviews, these roles were described as being less-bound by a specific venue or physical space and involving the promotion of public access and engagement in the arts, often through supporting local residents and groups in the making of art through projects based in specific communities or community arts projects as well as supporting the progression of local artists. The provision of dedicated arts venues has been described as providing new mechanisms for this work.

Initial findings from this sample of interviews indicate that some of this development work has been redirected to focus on audience development for the venue itself. The reasons vary. For some, this activity is an extension of the development work described above. For others, it is as a result of pressure to keep venues financially self-sustaining through ticket and hire sales, especially due to heavy budget cuts the arts have experienced in NI (Meredith 2015).

Whatever the case, venue programming must also respond to economic and social policy objectives outlined in Executive level policies as well as at local

government level, in addition to serving as spaces for artistic experimentation, social and voluntary arts provision (Gray 2002). As a result, each venue is facing the challenge of trying to be many different things to many different people. However, research shows that the establishment of the centres has not necessarily tackled the barriers to participation in publicly funded arts that were initially envisioned (Northern Ireland Assembly [NIA], Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee 2016).

Furthermore, the interests and expertise of individual arts service teams have a great deal of influence not only over the programming and managing of these venues, but the services as a whole. Studies indicate that the elite nature and niche work of the arts means that while it can often be marginalized in relation to other areas of work within local government, such as housing and economic development, Councillors and other staff would rely on the 'expert advice' of arts and cultural service teams to determine budget spends among other decisions (Hysing 2014: 129). Research from public administration shows the significant role that individual bureaucrat's interests, belief systems and personal commitments play in shaping services, particularly decisions made in relation to strategic development and allocation of resources at local government level (Cockburn 1977; Lipsky 1980; Hysing 2014) and in the arts and culture (Johanson et al. 2014).

As a result, arts service staff likely have a degree of influence in the policy process for arts and culture at local level. Research from Australia shows how this power is informal; often actioned through roles as key negotiators for arts and culture within the structures of the local government institution as well as in decisions for how a budget is spent and what artistic, creative and cultural activities and art forms are given priority (Johanson et al. 2014). Interviews with arts service staff in NI support this research. Arts and cultural vision, strategy and activities appear to be aligned to the 'interest' and 'skills' of particular arts service staff in each local council. Provision and work undertaken is also dependent on the 'freedom' and/or 'support' the arts service staff has from line management (R4). Still, more research is needed to understand how policy may be developing in a highly local- and personal-ized manner as a result.

Finally, the recent restructuring of local councils in NI has brought new, as well as some devolution of, powers and responsibilities to the local government level. In addition to the reduction in the number of councils (from 26 to eleven), key central government activities such as planning, local economic development and local tourism have been transferred. This reform includes a new statutory Community Planning process. Articulated as championing civil renewal and improving public service efficiency through greater integration of services at local level, the process aims to 'bring decision making closer to citizens and communities' (DOE 2015: 2; Local Government Act 2014). It requires that local councils

Will work with statutory bodies and their communities to develop and implement a shared vision for promoting the well-being of an area, community cohesion and improving the quality of life of its citizens. (DOE 2015: 2)

ACNI recently introduced a new Local Government Challenge Fund connected to Community Planning to ten council areas (excluding Belfast, where arts organizations already receive relationally substantial Arts Council investment overall). The £1.5 million Lottery investment aims to help embed the arts across the emerging themes in the Community Planning process: economic regeneration, community relations, social cohesion, tourism and the health and wellbeing of citizens in addition to communicating a sense of place in the new council boundaries. The proposed funding will see ACNI match local councils up to £150,000, which must be used to 'implement arts and cultural programming that supports the Councils' community planning objectives' (ACNI 2016: n.pag.).

In summary, local government holds a significant position in setting the terms and conditions for state support for cultural participation in NI. The vague articulation as to what constitutes arts and cultural participation at Executive level coupled with the absence of an Executive level framework for arts, creativity and culture in NI along with the provision of many local council-managed arts venues across NI, and the development of new powers afforded to local government all

present an opportunity for arts service staff at local government level to initiate policies and programmes that directly engage the artistic, cultural and creative interests and needs of local citizens. How the mechanisms for engagement may take place is largely dependent upon the skillset and the artistic interests of individual arts service staff. So, in order to understand capacity for supporting arts and cultural engagement at a community-wide level, it is therefore critical to understand the focus and capacity of individual arts service teams in local government.

Creative Citizens and the MEABC team

The 2014 and 2015 Creative Citizens programme addresses some of the challenges raised above. This section presents some background and description of those programmes, as they are the basis for the capacity development on which this article focuses.

Creative Citizens is a public facing, festival-like programme. In 2014 it was held between March and June of that year. It focused solely on the borough of Ballymena, which has a population of 64,044 and is recognized as part of Rural NI and the Northern Corridor, connecting Londonderry to Dublin and providing access to the Antrim Glens and Coast (Department for Infrastructure [DI] 2001). It is also the main retail area for the north-east region of NI (Department for Social Development [DSD] 2009). However, as part of the public administration reforms taking place in NI, the council and staff were preparing for the amalgamation of that borough with those of Larne and Carrickfergus into what is

now known as MEABC. Mid and East Antrim has 7.4 per cent of the Northern Irish population with 137,223 people, 60 per cent of whom live in the three main towns, with the other 40 per cent based in smaller 'towns, villages, small settlements and the open countryside' (Mid and East Antrim Borough Council [MEABC] 2017: 16). The 2015 Creative Citizens programme took place during and beyond the period of amalgamation, April 2015, and thus aimed to address the whole of Mid and East Antrim Borough.

The council merger has brought arts, heritage, museum and cultural services from the councils of Larne and Carrickfergus together with that of Ballymena. One Director of Services, who participated in this research, oversees this work. However, it is the Ballymena team on which this article focuses as they had the remit for arts development for MEABC at the time of research. This team is made up of three individuals: an Arts Development Officer, who oversees two staff members who work within the local government offices alongside any short-term contract staff who might be contracted for events, activities and other work. This three person team has been responsible for managing and programming the Braid Arts Centre, a dedicated arts venue with a 400-seat theatre, 77-seat studio theatre, arts workshop spaces and a small gallery space. It is part of the Ballymena Town Hall complex in Ballymena town centre.

Creative Citizens 2014 was initiated as a pilot project by the Arts Development Service of Ballymena Borough Council (BBC) in partnership with Voluntary Arts Ireland (VAI), VAI is part of the Voluntary Arts Network, a charity and support agency for the voluntary arts aimed at promoting and increasing participation in

cultural activities across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland (serving Republic of Ireland and NI together; Wales; England; and Scotland). The organization has continued to provide some funding and promotional support for Creative Citizens under different activities of its own work, which have been aimed at supporting local cultural infrastructure.

Creative Citizens replaced Ballymena's annual general arts festival, which showcased both professional and amateur arts and was programmed and hosted solely by the council staff. In developing Creative Citizens, VAI and BBC staff all sought to address shared aims of building audiences and participants for the professional, amateur and voluntary arts, fostering connections between local arts facilities and groups and generating interest around the idea of creative citizenship. More specifically the two organizational partners sought to:

- Encourage and further advance active involvement in creative cultural activity
- Provide local people the opportunity to explore the value of creative citizenship' (Ballymena Borough Council [BBC] 2014: 1) recognized as participation in civic life through creative cultural activity – 'traditional amateur arts and crafts groups as well as wider (and emerging) definitions of the arts within differing cultures, new forms of digital creativity and other areas of cultural creativity, such as those practised in gardens, kitchens and workshops' (McGlyn 2016: n.pag.).

- Grow audiences for arts, cultural and creative activity; and
- Re-think 'spaces and services engaging with local and regional arts in a new and exciting way' (BBC 2014: 1).

The Arts Development Service of Ballymena took a different approach from its usual practice in delivering Creative Citizens 2014 and 2015, which is explored further in this article. Their development began with a call to local citizens: 'What are you doing that is creative?'. This call was promoted with support of VAI through media outlets and via face-to-face conversations between citizens and staff. It was also promoted through local government mail-outs sent to individuals and organizations from a range of sectors across the borough (Ballymena in 2014 and MEABC area in 2015) including local arts groups, health, education, business, churches, sports and community organizations.

The programme's range and reach of activities in both 2014 and 2015 – are a result of the responses received. In addition to some council initiated programming, most events and activities in 2014 and 15 were initiated and hosted by local people, businesses and groups. These included

- Discursive activities that generated cultural maps of areas
- Activities from garden clubs, restaurants
- Activities that mixed professional and publicly funded arts
- Activities and events in the dedicated arts centre, the Braid

- Arts events taking place in non-traditional settings in area churches, shops, hotels, restaurants and town centre streets.
- Professional arts programming including exhibitions, performances and artist in residency activities.

In 2014, the programme saw a fivefold increase in the number of events and over a three-fold increase in the number of participants between the typical council-led arts festival programme and Creative Citizens 2014 in the area of Ballymena.

Those participants include audience members, volunteers, workshop participants and creative makers, including professional artists. That increase prompted its continuation as a public programme in March – June 2015 by MEABC but additionally as an action-research project as part of Voluntary Arts' Our Cultural Commons initiative. Our Cultural Commons was a programme of debates, public discussions, conferences, research projects and other activities in 2015 that sought to map and explore models for sustaining local cultural infrastructure.¹

The reach of the 2015 Creative Citizens programme was not as extensively proportional in Mid and East Antrim, perhaps due to its situation in the midst of the council amalgamation.

Methodology

The findings shared here reflect a research period from March 2015–September 2015.

In March 2015, just prior to the establishment of MEABC, I joined VAI and BBC in exploring Creative Citizens as an action research project within Our Cultural Commons. The initial goal of the research has been to take the Creative Citizen's programme as a basis from which to develop greater understanding of cultural participation in the area. Specifically, how local citizens understand and currently engage in creative activity, in order to assess how that relates, or not, to the area's existing arts and cultural infrastructure (tangible and intangible) and local council provision.

What has resulted is a co-researcher relationship between the Arts Development Officer of MEABC, the CEO of Voluntary Arts Ireland and me, a researcher from Queen's University Belfast. Co-production of research on Creative Citizens has involved largely qualitative research methods, which are appropriate for understanding how practices occur and develop, particularly in relation to public service (Warde 2014; Barzelay 1993). A case study approach allows for understanding individual programmes of activity and decision-making processes. Single case studies prove particularly useful in illuminating models of administration in public management, including capacity building approaches (Durose et al. 2014; Barzelay 1993).

Co-production has taken place throughout various aspects of the research programme. Working together, the three of us determined and scoped the parameters of our initial enquiry, as described above. In addition, while I have led

in suggesting approaches and theoretical frameworks, we have shared in data collection and analysis (Durose et al 2014; Lassiter 2005). Important in this process has been recognizing the different perspectives, knowledge and experience we each bring to the research process. In this way 'experiential expertise' is understood to be just as valid as that of the perspective of the academic researcher with each individual having a voice in research design, implementation and analysis (Durose et al 2014: 2; Cotterill and Richardson 2010; Collins and Evans 2002). VAI and MEABC colleagues shared reflections and analysis of the overall experience of the Creative Citizens programme during research meetings. Our MEABC colleague collected statistical data on attendance and participation figures. Our VAI colleague engaged in interview data collection reviewing the experiences of participants involved in Creative Citizens 2014 activities, which have been documented in report form (BBC 2014; VAI 2014). I equally conducted a series of research interviews (5) and a focus group discussion ($n=5$) with Creative Citizens participants (detailed above), which were recorded and transcribed. The research presented here is additionally informed by interviews ($n=9$) that I conducted with local government arts service staff throughout NI. Informed consent with appropriate ethical guidelines was followed (British Sociological Association [BSA] 2002).

All data collected in relation to Creative Citizens was analysed through a collaborative process (Lassiter 2005). For the work presented in this article, two collaborative analysis sessions were held, which were recorded and transcribed

to foster greater reflexivity and reflection. Sessions typically involved a circulation of notes/comments prior to meeting. I also presented and shared outside research and literature I had reviewed at the sessions to facilitate analysis and critical thinking around the data. Critical reflexivity and self-awareness in the research process was a particular focus of our shared data analysis (Rhodes 2015; Hill 2006). In our discussions, we debated how our own perception, work environment and desired advocacy outcomes might impact on the interpretation of data (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). The approaches employed have allowed us to share knowledge that typically remains internalized within our own daily practices and experiences and professional peer networks (arts development agency, local government and academia) (Durá et al. 2014). Division of labour was sensitive to the time resources allowed by each of us (Banks and Manners 2012). For this reason, while I have led on the writing of any conference papers and publications, we have employed a co-editorial approach to any associated writing up process (Lassiter 2005).

Exploring Creative Citizens as an action research project has rested on the idea that 'knowing occurs with the act, the process of constructing issues and seeking improvements' (Collins and Ison 2006: 11). A learning framework is appropriate for analysis of arts and cultural policy, activities and programmes aimed at participation, which are typically viewed as learning processes in and of themselves (Collins and Ison 2006; Parsons 2002). Action research is an on-going, flexible process of applied research that joins practice-based 'action

(change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge)' (Costello 2011: 6). It involves both reflective practice (Schön 1983) and experiential learning (Kolb 1984). This approach is in contrast to 'traditional policy instruments, [which] are built on an epistemological foundation of fixed forms of knowledge' (Collins and Ison 2006: 11). Understanding processes of change require consideration of who learns, what is learned and how that learning is applied. The next section explores these ideas in more detail.

Capacity building from Creative Citizens

Arriving at a discussion on capacity building was unplanned. In considering what types of local cultural participation were becoming apparent by way of the responses to Creative Citizens, we became acutely aware of how this information was challenging assumptions and altering practices for the MEABC Arts Development Service team directly engaged in the programme in real time. Yet, theories on capacity building in management studies describe how approaches to capacity building are often anything but unintentional. Activities often focus on enhancing or developing organizational procedures; acquiring new resources, including financial; building networks or developing the skills of individual and teams of staff (Millar and Doherty 2016). As Millar and Doherty (2016: 370) explain, it is 'ultimately about introducing change within [an] organization to address a gap in effectiveness; whether that gap refers to deficiencies within the organization or improvements on existing strengths'. Applied to government, capacity refers to the 'ability [...] to anticipate and influence change, to make

decisions and develop policy and to attract and manage resources' (Bertelli et al 2014: 345).

When considering capacity building alongside theories of practice, though, one can see how capacity building may evolve through engagement in a process of social learning. It can occur informally and involve the development of a wide range of both hard and soft skills as well as relationships. Theories of practice illuminate how everyday, professional experiences and the ways in which people relate to and view one another become habitual (Barnes 2001; Warde 2014: 290). As sociologist Alan Warde explains,

Much practical activity emanates from embodied and embedded capacities – learned through experience and retained as a store of competence, in the form of mental and manual procedures, which may be called upon more or less frequently as required. (Warde 2014: 292)

When in an unfamiliar situation, environment or circumstance, 'habituation' is challenged (Warde 2014: 292).

In fact, individuals' associations and interactions with one another are as significant in establishing or challenging routines and habits as an individual's own skills and knowledge (Warde 2014). While the MEABC team were looking for a change in the use of their resources, they were initially focused on learning

more about local cultural participation patterns in order to foster a change in the consumption of their service, rather than its production. In other words, audience development, rather than capacity building was the main goal. The possibility of operational change to how they approach working with and for the local community was unexpected.

The crux of the team's learning is based on the call they posed to promote a new festival programme: 'what are you doing that's creative?' The response they received put them in 'unfamiliar' territory. They met and engaged in activities with new networks and individuals. This interaction has challenged their habits and assumptions and caused them to rethink how they see their position as artistic, creative and cultural 'experts' in their locality. As a result, they have begun to alter the ways in which they work. These two areas, which have implications for fostering more democratic and participatory engagement in not only publicly funded arts, but also local cultural governance, are explored in further detail below.

Broadening terminology

As part of their routine practice, the team developed this question for practical reasons. They sought to refresh the services' annual festival programme, which had been struggling to meet budget and attracting many of the same performance groups and audiences over the year. However, where previously, the Arts team developed their annual festival solely in house and as a

professional arts programme for people to attend, Creative Citizens invited people and groups to interpret for themselves how they defined creativity. The approach taken has been described as a 'mini audit' in which the team sought to learn 'what's going on in a normal month in the borough'. One member explains:

So I thought lets take a look at this [...] Let's not just restrict it to arts and culture. Let's see who's being creative out there. So we had looked at restaurants, we had looked at the chip shop around the corner... We looked at gardening competitions and all sorts of stuff [...] we wrote to churches [...] to gardening clubs, young farmers, everybody we could think of and arts groups and community groups. (Respondent 1 [R1] 2015)

The team learned of a diversity of activity happening in the locality about which they had previously been unaware. While these activities became practically applied to the programming of an event-run, i.e. Creative Citizens, they had longer-term impact on the team's own interpretation of their resources. In particular, the response to their call challenged their assumptions about their council-run, dedicated arts venue as the main cultural asset in the locality:

[We] thought, these people are out there are, regardless of the festival and what's happening inside the big shiny palace [the dedicated arts venue], this is what's happening out there in the borough, that we need to get involved with. (R1 2015)

Research from Australia and England has shown that a broader understanding of participation in cultural activity as defined by local people reveals a wider range of cultural assets existing within a given locality (Gibson 2011; Gilmore 2014). For the MEABC team, the open call alerted them to new sets of cultural assets. They became aware of 'all sorts of other organizations [and groups] who wanted to' work with them (R1 2015). For the MEABC team in particular, social, voluntary, religious and professional networks, ideas and partnerships became valued as important assets within the local cultural infrastructure.

For example, as a result of the 2014 programme the MEABC team was approached in 2015 by two clergy with an idea to bring the Methodist Arts Collection of modern paintings of Christian art, owned by the Methodist Church in Britain, to Ballymena. The clergy assisted in bringing a network of nine local churches and the Ballymena Inter Church Forum together with the council arts service team to develop a programme of activity around the Collection. This network particularly assisted the MEABC team in establishing an Arts Ambassadors invigilation programme by which local people volunteered to serve as guides for the exhibition of the Collection at the Braid Arts Centre as well as in the churches, which displayed one painting each. The Ambassadors also assisted the churches in devising and hosting their own public event in conjunction with their display. In this scenario, new 'material and immaterial' (Gibson 2011: n.pag.) cultural assets were revealed to the MEABC team: as

physical assets – the churches as artistic exhibition and programmatic venues – and as human and emotional assets – the clergy as brokers for artistic engagement within their congregations, the congregations as audience networks and the group of 126 volunteers, which still exists ‘as a huge resource’ (R1 2015):

They manned the exhibition [...] from ten in the morning to eight at night in the Braid. They went out and they organized events in their own churches. They delivered posters. They talked to the public [...] And 90 per cent of them came because they felt, ‘gosh, the minister’s asked me. I need to go. (R1 2015)

From this perspective, cultural assets are both ‘individual and collective’ (Vidal and Keating 2004: 126, quoted in Lavarack and Ryan 2015: 46). They are physical and ephemeral. They include official, state-supported and market-oriented cultural products and enterprises as well as everyday activities, groups and knowledge: skills, creativity, ideas, physical facilities, finances, people and partnerships. ‘Attached to particular peoples and places’ (Gibson 2011: n.pag.; Gilmore 2014), they are the ‘community capacity’ that CPP projects have begun to uncover (Robinson 2016). They are critical to building a sense of what capacity exists locally for fostering more democratic and participatory engagement in the publicly funded arts and local cultural governance.

New operational approaches

The context of cultural policy in NI described above has been fostering a culture in MEABC, which has positioned the Braid Arts Centre as a focus of the local government's arts service. The requirements of maintaining and occupying the building has led to a hiring culture that has both reflected, and been reflective of, the limited view of what constitutes cultural participation and thus cultural assets, explored earlier in this article. Two team members explain:

I suppose promoters would just come along and hire the theatre and we would just do our promotion for it and that would really be it. (Respondent 2 [R2] 2015)

Before we would have waited for people to come to us so this way we were going to them [...] it would have been quick in, quick out, thanks, here you go, nice to see you. Goodbye sort of thing. (Respondent 3 [R3] 2015)

The team has been preoccupied with creating programming that maintains an income in addition to an arts and cultural programme of interest to a variety of local constituents.

Creative Citizens set out to address these issues. It was not a radical intervention. However, it provided a mechanism for the MEABC arts service staff to experience and reflect on new operational practices that would suit the culture, structure and conditions of work within the local government body. It has moved the team from seeing what they do as being about 'creative goods and service value' to facilitating 'a space for human activity', where local citizens and public servant come together to exchange knowledge and learn from one another (Kirlin 1996 referenced in Johnson 2011: 161). One staff member explains:

[We don't need] to feel that it's us that has to provide all these creative opportunities for people [...] getting out of that mindset of 'I've got to programme a 400 seat theatre here [...] It's the idea now of bringing all these organisations in, whether they're business or community or voluntary or health or whatever. Bringing them in as well to see what can be done with the arts. (R1 2015)

As this statement demonstrates, seeing a wider range of assets as 'equally and [culturally] important to arts venues' moves questions of capacity from a focus on consumption to also include production (Evans 2016; Gilmore 2014: 23). Of particular relevance here is how the expanding interpretation of arts, creative and cultural activity and assets, which the Creative Citizens programme prompted, in turn facilitated new thinking regarding the way the team operates. The team began to value greater – and new types of – interaction with the local community.

One explains, '[...] it's really helpful for us to go out and talk to people and find out what they're doing' (Respondent 3 [R3] 2015).

This engagement has in turn provided the MEABC team the 'the opportunity to [...] forge relationships with [local people]' (R3 2015). These relationships have facilitated practical operational changes, such as the expansion of the staff's local network and the development of a new database of contacts. One explains what the practice typically allows for:

It would just be very easy, when you've got 100 working arts groups in your borough [...] it's a big enough job of work to work with them and deal with them. Just in the arts world. Um and sometimes you get caught up in that. (R1 2015 2015)

However, engagement with others via Creative Citizens has altered the team's perspective of multi-sectoral collaboration, presenting new areas of work and potential partnerships for them even outside the scope of Creative Citizens with groups like the local Inter-Ethnic Forum and the health trust. It is not just about programming a building, but facilitating others to utilize the building and connect the variety of artistic, creative and cultural activity in the locality.

These engagements have encouraged the team to appreciate a greater sense of mutual expertise and community capacity existing locally, an aspect at the heart

of the aims of CPP (Robinson 2016). For the MEABC team, these new interactions are challenging a view that the dedicated arts venue is the main focus of the service and is facilitating their rethink of the local government arts service as facilitative. One described this as ‘turn[ing] the tables’ on their practice (R1 2015). They discussed offering their expertise in marketing, curating, programming and producing as well as their professional arts networks to different groups.

Concurrently, they reflected enhanced value in asking people, groups and organizations outside the traditional / professional arts sphere for ‘help’, specifically ‘practical [...] advice or ideas’, as well as ‘artistic or creative ideas’ and networks. As demonstrated in Jancovich’s (2015: 22) study and the CPP evaluation (Robinson 2016), the capacities of arts professionals are enhanced through exchange of ideas and skills with the public: ‘Before, [...] we would have done everything ourselves, but now I wouldn’t be afraid to ask organisations’ (R1 2015). While this value is unmistakably related to the goal of the service to facilitate engagement with the dedicated arts venue and engagement with the professional arts, it by no means belittles it. New relationships have also provided staff members an opportunity to think differently about artistic programming. One staff member explains his surprise at the openness of both a barbershop business owner and a professional harpist at hosting a performance in the shop:

I was thinking, this is going to be a bit crazy and she absolutely loved it [...] you know people were a lot more open to things that we were suggesting, so [I've realised] maybe not to be scared to go out and ask people, 'what do you think of this crazy idea.' You'd be surprised, often people actually engage with it. (R3 2015)

As discussed earlier, the hierarchical nature of the arts can minimize professionals' perceptions of what constitutes cultural participation as well as the public's competence in the arts. Engagement in Creative Citizens has challenged these traditional viewpoints for the MEABC team and facilitated change in their operational procedures. They now seek work that involves collaboration with non-arts groups and individuals and are currently aiming to establish a Community Programmer programme, which will facilitate sharing of skills from the MEABC team to local citizens who will be provided with budgets. It is aimed to be a more formal sharing of expertise, perceptions and experiences between groups and individual citizens with the MEABC team in order to develop arts services and programming in local districts across the Borough.

Conclusion

In some ways, Ballymena is not a natural arts place but more of an industrial place [...] yet when you look, there are all sorts of arts groups

doing things [...] stated by a] Local Councillor on Creative Citizens, 2014.
(VAI 2014: 6)

As this statement from a local councillor demonstrates, assumptions can often limit possibilities. The wider governance trend in the United Kingdom and Europe to increase civic engagement in civil society organizations, personalize public services and involve citizens in influencing policy that has taken hold in the arts and cultural sector has only recently emerged as a formal possibility in local government in NI. Recent reforms in public administration are encouraging civic engagement in public services and policy-making that may have impact on the sector, particularly as local councils there have statutory roles in arts and cultural service provision. However, the capacity to do so has thus far been limited by a narrow articulation of cultural participation in executive level strategies and cultural assets at local level.

This study has aimed to bring debates about capacity for citizen engagement in local cultural governance to light. It has explored how engagement in the Creative Citizens programme has altered the way that the MEABC arts service team now interprets cultural participation and thus aims to engage differently with their local constituents. While what has taken place amongst the MEABC team is not necessarily new practice within the arts and cultural sector in the United Kingdom (Jancovich 2015; Stevenson and Blanche 2015), it has been new for this team. Engagement in the delivery of an output, a public-facing programme, like Creative Citizens, has facilitated an opportunity to reflect on individuals'

assumptions regarding cultural participation and assets existing amongst local constituents. Creative Citizens has also allowed for the team's discovery of new mechanisms for working with local citizens in ways that suit the performance targets of MEABC, particularly in relation to the arts venue. The deficit-model view of engagement with artistic, creative and cultural activity is problematic. The team has discovered that there is need for broader terminology and capacity to develop procedures that include the viewpoints and engagement of the citizens, who the service is aimed at serving.

While the capacity building explored here is informal, it is not insignificant. The study brings new areas of focus to investigations of community capacity in artistic, creative and cultural participation at local level already being investigated in programmes like CPP. More specifically, it illuminates that local government is a key actor in local networks of cultural participation with arts service staff as brokers playing a significant role in shaping the terms and conditions for democratic local cultural governance. Research in public administration and the arts demonstrates that practitioner perception, institutional design and organizational factors are critical to setting the circumstances for such efforts (Kudra and Driskell 2009; Keaney 2006; Yang 2009; Fennell and Gavelin 2009). There needs to be greater awareness that capacity building is a multi-directional process. Openness to participatory knowledge exchange between public servants, partners and citizens may foster greater citizen engagement in local cultural governance, but the capacity to do so must first be understood.

Reflection on the terminology and operational practices regarding cultural participation in local government is required. But this reflection needs to take place through mechanisms that recognize the procedures of local councils.

The study provides a window on new possibilities for framing and solving issues related to understanding and supporting cultural participation and more democratic means for local cultural governance. However, as a single case study, this investigation is only an initial contribution to the field of research. The change that has begun to emerge for the MEABC team is limited to only those individuals at that moment. However, it is in the application to practice where new learning or knowledge is formalized and filters through to developing individual, organizational and sectoral capacity, leading to new policies and procedures (Bryan and Brown 2015). More research is needed, however, to understand the circumstances of arts and cultural policy and service provision in local government and how this impacts on democratic processes for local cultural governance. Further comparative study within the United Kingdom could also illuminate approaches to citizen participation in decision-making, particularly in light of different funding structures and relationships with executive level policy-making bodies.

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Note

¹ Our Cultural Commons took place across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland by way of the Voluntary Arts bodies (NI, England, Scotland, Wales and Republic of Ireland) in partnership with locally based organizations and groups.